**THE EXPOSITION OF HOLY SCRIPTURE BY ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

**1 KINGS-002. A YOUNG MAN'S WISE CHOICE OF WISDOM by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"5. In Gibeon the Lord appeared to Solomon in a dream by night: and God said, Ask what I shall give thee. 6. And Solomon said, Thou hast shewed unto Thy servant David my father great mercy, according as he walked before Thee in truth, and in righteousness, and in uprightness of heart with Thee; and Thou hast kept for him this great kindness, that Thou hast given him a son to sit on his throne, as it is this day. 7. And now, O Lord my God, Thou hast made Thy servant king instead of David my father: and I am but a little child: I know not how to go out or come in. 8. And Thy servant is in the midst of Thy people which Thou hast chosen, a great people, that cannot be numbered nor counted for multitude. 9. Give therefore Thy servant an understanding heart to judge Thy people, that I may discern between good and bad: for who is able to judge this Thy so great a people? 10. And the speech pleased the Lord, that Solomon had asked this thing. 11. And God said unto him, Because thou hast asked this thing, and hast not asked for thyself long life; neither hast asked riches for thyself, nor hast asked the life of thine enemies; but hast asked for thyself understanding to discern judgment; 12. Behold, I have done according to thy words: lo, I have given thee a wise and an understanding heart; so that there was none like thee before thee, neither after thee shall any arise like unto thee. 13. And I have also given thee that which thou hast not asked, both riches and honour: so that there shall not be any among the kings like unto thee all thy days. 14. And if thou wilt walk in My ways, to keep My statutes and My commandments, as thy father David did walk, then I will lengthen thy days. 15. And Solomon awoke; and, behold, It was a dream. And he came to Jerusalem, and stood before the ark of the covenant of the Lord, and offered up burnt offerings, and offered peace offerings, and made a feast to all his servants."*

*1 Kings 3:5-15*

The new king was apparently some nineteen or twenty years old on his accession. He stepped at once out of seclusion and idleness to bear the whole weight of the kingdom. The glories of David's reign, his brother Adonijah's pretensions to the crown, the smouldering hostility of Saul's old partisans, made his position difficult and his throne unsteady. No doubt, the weight of too much dignity pressed on the youth, and this dream found a point of origin in his waking thoughts. God does not thus reveal Himself to men who seek Him not; and the offer in the vision is but the repetition of what Solomon felt in many a waking moment of meditation that God was saying to him, and the choice he makes in it is the choice that he had already made. He who seeks wisdom first is already wise.

**I.** Note the wide possibilities opened by the divine offer. Our narrative brings that gracious offer into connection with Solomon's lavish sacrifice before the Tabernacle at Gibeon. God loveth a cheerful giver and because these thousand burnt offerings meant devotion and thankfulness, therefore He who lets no man be the poorer for what he gives to Him, and is honoured most, not by our givings to, but by our takings from Him, comes in the quiet night, and puts the key of all His treasures into the young king's hands. In a very real sense this divine voice is but the putting into words of the fact as to every young life. The all but boundless possibilities before every young man and woman give solemnity to their position, which they too often do not recognise till youth is past. The future lies blank before them, ready to receive what they choose to write on its page. Once written, it is indelible. They are still free from the limitations of habit and associations. They have still the capacity and the opportunity of choice. There are limits, of course, but still it is scarcely exaggeration to say that a man may become almost anything he likes, if he strongly wills it when young, and sticks to his resolve. When the liquid iron flows from the blast furnace, it may be run into any mould; but it soon cools and hardens, and obstinately keeps its shape, in spite of hammers.

If young men and women could but see the possibilities of their youth, and the issues that hang on early choice, as clearly as they will see them some day, there would be fewer wasted mornings of life and fewer gloomy sunsets. But the misery is that so many do not choose at all, but just let things slide, and allow themselves to be moulded by whatever influence happens to be strongest. For one man who goes wrong by deliberate choice, with open eyes, there are twenty who simply drift. Unfortunately, there is more evil than good in the world; and if a lad takes his colour from his surroundings, the chances are terribly against his coming to anything high, noble, or pure. This world is no place for a man who cannot say No. If we are like the weeds in a stream, and let it decide which way we shall point, we shall be sure to point downwards. It would do much to secure the choice of the Good, if there were a clear recognition by all young persons of the fact that they have the choice to make, and are really making it unconsciously. If they could be brought, like Solomon, to put their ruling wish into plain words, many who are not ashamed to yield to unworthy desires would be ashamed to speak them out baldly. Let each ask himself, Suppose that I had to say out what I want most, dare I avow before my own conscience, to say nothing of God, what it is?

Looked at from a somewhat different point of view, God's offer to Solomon presupposes God's knowledge and approval of his wishes. He does not give blank cheques to those whom He cannot trust to fill them up rightly. When James and John tried to commit Jesus to a blind promise that Thou shouldest do for us whatsoever we shall ask of Thee, their answer was a question as to what they wished. Delight thyself also in the Lord, and He shall give thee the desires of thine heart. God loves us too well to let us have carte blanche unless our wills run parallel with His. He is a foolish and cruel father who promises compliance with all his child's unknown wishes. Not such is our Father's loving discipline. It is to those who abide in Christ, and have Him abiding in them, moulding their longings and prayers, that the great promise is sealed: Ye shall ask what ye will, and it shall be done unto you.

**II.** Note next the wise choice of wisdom. Had not Solomon been wise before, he had not known the worth of wisdom. The dunghill cocks of this world cannot know the price of this pearl; those that have it know that all other excellencies are but trash and rubbish unto it. Solomon's prayer shows the temper with which he entered on his reign. There is no exultation; his serious and clear-eyed spirit sees in rule a heavy task. He contrasts his inexperienced rawness with the truth and righteousness and veteran maturity of his great predecessor, and trembles to think that he, a mere lad, sits on David's throne. But he pleads with God that He has made him king, and implies that therefore God is bound to fit him for his office. That is the boldness permitted to faith,--to remind God of His own past acts, which pledge Him to give what He has put us into circumstances to need. With beautiful humility, Solomon dwells on his youth and inexperience, and on the vastness of the charge laid on him. All these considerations are the motives for his choice of a gift, and also pleas with God to grant his request.

He asks for the practical wisdom needed for ruling in these old days, when the king was judge as well as ruler and captain. Was this the highest gift that he could have asked or received? Surely the deep longings of his father for communion with God were yet better. No doubt the wisdom of the Book of Proverbs is religion and morality as well as true thinking, but the understanding heart to judge Thy people which Solomon asked and received is narrower and more secular in its meaning. There is no sign in his biography that he ever had the deep inward devotion of his father. After the poet-psalmist came the prosaic and keen-sighted shrewd man of affairs. The one breathed his ardent soul into psalms, which feed devotion to-day; the other crystallised his discernment in three thousand proverbs, and, though his songs were one thousand and five they touched a lower range, both of poetry and religious feeling, than his father's, as may be expressed by calling them songs, not psalms.

But though the request is not the highest, it may well be taken as a pattern by the young. Note the view of his position from which it rises. To Solomon dignity meant duty; and his crown was not a toy, but a task. The responsibilities, not the enjoyments, of his station were uppermost in his mind. That is the only right view to take. Youth is meant to be enthusiastic, and to feed its aspirations on noble ideals, and if, instead of that, it does as too many do, especially in countries where wealth abounds, namely, regards life as a garden of delights, or sometimes as a sty where young men may wallow in pleasures, then farewell to all hopes of high achievements or of an honourable career. Youthful ideals will fade fast enough; but alas for the life which had none to begin with! Note the sense of insufficiency for his task. Youth is prone to be over-confident, and to think that it can do better than its fathers, who were as confident in their time. There is a false humility which flattens the spirit and keeps from plain duty; and there is a true lowliness which feels that the task must be attempted, though the heart may shrink, and which impels to prayer for fitness not its own. He who tells God his consciousness of impotence, and asks Him to supply His strength to its weakness and His wisdom to its inexperience, will never shirk work because it is too great, nor ever fail to find power according to his need.

**III.** Note God's answer. Solomon gets his wish, and much which he had not asked besides. The divine answer is in two parts. First, the reasons for the large gift; and second, the details of the gift. His not wishing material good was the very reason why he obtained it. That is not always so; for often enough a man whose whole nature is sharpened to one point, in the intensity of his desire to make money, will succeed. But what then? He will be none the better, but the poorer, for his wealth. But this is always true,--that the people who do not make worldly good their first object are the people who can be most safely trusted with it, and who get most enjoyment out of it. Whether in the precise form of the gift to Solomon or not, outward good does attend a life which sets duty before pleasure, and desires most to be able to do it. All earthly good is exalted by being put second, and degraded as well as corrupted by being put first. The water lapped up in the palm, as the soldier marches, is sweeter than the abundant draughts swilled down by self-indulgence. Seek ye first the kingdom of God, ... and all these things shall be added unto you.

Note the largeness of the gift. When God is pleased with a man's prayers, He gives more than was asked, and so teaches us to be ashamed of the smallness of our expectations, and widens our desires by His overlapping bestowments. First, He gives the wisdom asked. Dependence on God, rising from the sense of our own ignorance, has a wonderful power of bringing illumination, even as to small matters of practical duty. Solomon asked it, to guide him in his judicial decisions; and the first case to which it was applied, when received, was a miserable quarrel between two disreputable women. A devout heart, purged from self-conceit, is often gifted with a piercing wisdom before which the crafty shrewdness of the world is abashed. We cannot be wise as serpents unless we are harmless as doves. The world may think such wisdom folly, but she will be justified of her children. Is the saying of James's Epistle a reminiscence of Solomon's dream, If any of you lack wisdom, let him ask of God, ... and it shall be given him?

Then follows the grant of the unasked goods,--riches, honour, and length of days. Surely we hear an echo of these promises in that magnificent description of Wisdom in the Book of Proverbs: Length of days is in her right hand; in her left hand are riches and honour These and similar gifts may or may not follow our choice of divine wisdom as our truest good If we have really chosen it, we shall regard them as make-weights, to be thankfully received and rightly used, but not as indispensable. If we pursue wisdom for the sake of getting these, we shall lose both it and them. If we have set our desires most earnestly on the most worthy things, which are God's love and a character hallowed by His grace, we shall be rich indeed, whether what the world calls wealth be ours or no; and our days will be long enough if in them we have been prepared for the fuller wisdom and undying life of heaven.

Solomon realised his youthful aspirations. The only way to be sure of getting what we wish, is to wish what God desires to give,--even Himself,--and to ask it of Him. Solomon, like many a young man, outgrew his early dream. Was he happier or wiser when he was a worn-out voluptuary, smiling with cynical scorn at his young self, or when, with generous enthusiasm, he felt the solemnity of life and the awfulness of duty, and asked God to help his insufficiency? Was not the dream truer and more real than the waking hours of profligacy and unreal enjoyment?